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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 000304

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [GG](#)
SUBJECT: OPPOSITION POSTPONES HUNGER STRIKE, RESUMES
NEGOTIATIONS

REF: TBILISI 271

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (SBU) Summary: Early on February 22, the United National Council of Opposition (UNC) voted to postpone a hunger strike and street protest scheduled to begin that afternoon (reftel). Following the vote, UNC leader MP Levan Gachechiladze wrote and delivered an address explaining the opposition's need to resume negotiations following "firm guarantees from Speaker Burjanadze" that the government would meet the UNC's three preliminary demands within a week: releasing those arrested during the November 7 protests and replacing both the heads of the Public Broadcaster and Central Election Commission. Not all of the UNC members wanted to resume negotiations and some publicly criticized Gachechiladze for the decision. Their main rallying cry has been the absence of any concrete examples thus far of the government meeting any opposition demands. Republican Party Chairman David Usupashvili told us privately that Gachechiladze did a "strong job" of bringing the unwieldy UNC mechanism around to this more responsible course of action. Still, Usupashvili warned that this "really is the last chance" for the government to keep its agreements and exhibit some progress. Otherwise, he said, the radical opposition members will likely move to the street in permanent protests, regardless of UNC approval. End Summary.

UNC Leaders Persuade Return to Negotiations

12. (SBU) On February 22, Usupashvili briefed Poloff on the UNC's early morning decision to postpone the hunger strikes and street protests scheduled to begin that day until some time in March. Usupashvili said that Gachechiladze "did a great job" to persuade the radical parties in the UNC to allow negotiations with Burjanadze more time to work. Usupashvili said that once Gachechiladze and Salome Zourabichvili (Georgia's Way) agreed with the Republicans to postpone the hunger strike, those who wanted to protest (primarily the Conservatives and Koba Davitashvili's People's Party) could no longer force the issue. Usupashvili said this eventuality gave him hope that the opposition radicals would support the rest of the UNC in negotiating more seriously, with the option of protest now off the table.

"One More Last Chance for Talks"

13. (SBU) Usupashvili stressed that "this really is the last chance" for positive development from the negotiations. He said, "If some concrete results are not obtained from the talks, Gachechiladze can't hold it together any longer." Usupashvili believed that there has already been some

movement from the government in regard to the opposition's demands. Notably, six persons arrested on November 7, 2007 during the protests have been freed. Also, the Director of the Georgian Public Broadcaster, Tamar Kintsurashvili, is expected to resign before the end of February. (Note: As of now, Post is unaware that the opposition and government have agreed on a compromise candidate for Levan Tarkhnishvili, Chairman of the Central Election Commission. Parliament Speaker Burjanadze told the Ambassador that the opposition has suggested a respected judge but has not provided a specific name. End note.)

What's Next for Republicans, UNC?

¶4. (SBU) Usupashvili said much internal debate still exists within the UNC regarding party lists for the Spring parliamentary elections, how many there should be, and which parties - if any - should join together on joint lists. According to Usupashvili, Gachechiladze is pressuring the Republicans to remain in the UNC (contrary to a prior, internal Republican Party vote), because he does not want to lead a ticket of which they are not a member. Usupashvili said that Gachechiladze himself is now under more pressure to stay, following his speech on February 22.

¶5. (C) Usupashvili expressed frustration at the cumbersome decision-making process in the UNC. He said every party has a vote, and a decision requires a "consensus, or consensus minus one." The UNC's goals have changed significantly since the group was formed in September 2007 to change the date of parliamentary elections in the Constitution, said Usupashvili. If the New Rightists party (led by MP David

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Gamkrelidze) were to join the UNC and allow for multiple parties within the UNC to run on separate lists, Usupashvili said this would be one of the better scenarios for the Republicans. Although Usupashvili and Gamkrelidze have spoken informally about their parties joining forces, Usupashvili said the Republicans must see what other parties do (e.g. Giorgi Targamadze and his new Christian-Democrats), prior to relinquishing any more of his party's autonomy.

An Appeal for Support

¶6. (SBU) Usupashvili suggested that even if the USG cannot mediate talks between the opposition and government, he said it would reassure the UNC if someone from the international community could be "present" with Burjanadze around the negotiations. Usupashvili believes that this would help hold the government accountable to any agreement, as well as the opposition. Usupashvili said that the UNC leadership would suggest the same thing to the OSCE at a meeting later in the day. (Note: Poloff told Usupashvili that the Ambassador had met with Speaker Burjanadze earlier in the week and continues to encourage both sides to negotiate in good faith. We will continue to stay in close touch with both sides, but believe a more direct role is not appropriate at this time. End note.)

¶7. (SBU) Usupashvili noted that increased international support for the independent, media-monitoring Michnik Group would also be helpful. He said this was important due to the complications surrounding Imedi TV (Note: Due to a government investigation into owner Badri Patarkatsishvili's plans to overthrow the government, Imedi TV's already murky future became even less clear following Patarkatsishvili's death on February 12. End note.) Usupashvili said that both the opposition and government still respect the Michnik Group enough, that with an increased role and power, it can be effective in ensuring balance in the media during the coming election. Usupashvili said that during the January election,

political ads on Rustavi-2 and Mze (both owned by friends of the government), cost 8-10 times more than a commercial ad for the same timespot.

Comment

18. (C) On September 24, five leaders of the opposition met with CODEL Price and the Ambassador, including Usupashvili, Kukava, and Gamkrelidze (details reported septel). The differences (noted by Usupashvili on February 22) between MP Kahka Kukava's Conservatives and the moderates were kept under wraps during the meeting. Rather, the group of opposition leaders focused - and generally agreed on - genuine areas of concern facing democratic development in Georgia: notably, freedom of the press and expression, truly independent election administration at all levels, wiretapping of opposition members, the lack of a strong, independent judiciary, and the need for some type of Parliamentary oversight of law enforcement activities comprised the main areas of concern.

19. (C) Despite the common front with which the opposition addressed the CODEL, centrifugal political pressures are clearly growing within the opposition. The open differences voiced publicly after the vote to call off the hunger strikes reflected the widening differences between the moderates and radicals. The press reported the vote took place after an all-night meeting, in which the press heard violent arguments behind closed doors. Heated exchanges over tactics cover more fundamental approaches to democratic governance. The moderates (like Usupashvili) focus on the upcoming elections while more radicals simply want to engage in street theater/confrontation. The moderates are also undoubtedly hearing a growing chorus of popular disillusionment with the tactics and rhetoric of political confrontation, and a public desire for compromise.

TEFFT